

# METROPOLITAN LAWYERS SHOP TALK

*Metropolitan Lawyers chats with members of the legal community about their fascination with the cars they buy, sell, collect, restore, show, and sometimes race.*

## GILBERT M. ACUNA AND LAWRENCE SAVELL

**County Law Librarian and  
New York Lawyer, Columnist  
Teamed Up for Exhibit**

**F**ive years ago this month the Los Angeles County Law Library presented a unusual exhibition. Titled "Classic Cars and the Law," it was organized by Law Library Research Librarian Gilbert M. Acuna and inspired by a monthly column in Car Collector magazine written by New York attorney Lawrence Savell.

In the column, entitled "Old Cars and the Law," Savell uses appellate rulings to explore legal issues of interest to car collectors. Acuna, himself a collector, paired Savell's efforts with examples from his own collection of die-cast models of classic automobiles.

Savell's column topics range from the practical to the strange.

In this month's column, for example, he discusses a North Carolina Court of Appeals ruling arising out of a crash involving two 1970s vehicles, one of which was being used to tow the other at night. Another driver struck

one of the vehicles as the maneuver was being attempted and was killed, raising the issue of which vehicle's insurance coverage applied.

The court, Savell explains, ruled the owner was "using" both of the vehicles, doubling the amount of insurance coverage available.

The September column, which begins with a quote from Thomas Huxley, uses a Georgia case to explore the issue of what remedies are available to a collector who buys a car that may or may not have been stolen.

Though he is a lifetime Manhattan and Brooklyn resident who until recently didn't even own a car, Savell says he recalls reading books about cars growing up and being fascinated by old cars owned by his grandfather.

"I think for a lot of people positive aspects of their lives are defined by the cars that they had at the time," the attorney comments.

When he married about four years ago, Savell relates, he tracked down, purchased and had restored a 1966 Pontiac Catalina convertible of which his wife had happy memories from her high school days. It wasn't just the same model, the lawyer explains, it was the actual car.

He got the vehicle identification number from his father-in-law and eventually got the car through the executor of the estate of its most recent owner.

He started the car column for a different magazine in the middle 1980s, Savell recalls.

"I was being paid by the word, so it really inspired verbosity," he says.

The attorney says he has little difficulty finding 12 topics a year for his columns. It's deciding which cases to use that poses the challenge, he asserts.

Acuna says he had been a reader and admirer of Savell's columns for years before organizing the Law Library exhibit.

The librarian has a 1964 Ford Thunderbird hardtop that he is gradually restoring, but for the exhibit he used the die-cast models of classic cars he has collected over the past decade, linking them to cases written up by Savell or others he found on his own.

Collecting the models is a "fairly common" sideline for those who buy, sell and work on classic cars, Acuna asserts.

"If you happen to own a classic car, the two seem to go hand in hand," he says.

The die-casts can themselves be an expensive hobby, Acuna explains, running from \$25 for cheaper 1/25 scale versions to \$150 or more for 1/18 scale models which can have an impressive amount of detail.

Unlike plastic models, the die-casts come already assembled and painted, he notes. The Franklin Mint and the Danbury Mint are two of the leading manufacturers, Acuna says.

"Some of the die-cast engines are fully plumbed with wiring," Acuna observes.

Among his favorites from his collection are a 1/18 scale 1937 Cord with real leather seats and a 1/25 scale Danbury 1931 Cadillac. The Cadillac, he explains, was one of the first cars to use a V-16 engine, and the model has leather seats and functional doors, hood, trunk and steering wheel.

Another favorite, he relates, is Danbury's 1/25 scale 1961 Ferrari Testarossa.

As for his T-Bird restoration project, Acuna says it may be a while before that is completed.

He is saving up \$4,000 for the paint job.